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Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai as a National Epic

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Abstract: The epic Cilappatikāram had been adapted into three different versions, such as Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai, Kōvalanār Katai and Cilampu Kūral in Sri Lanka. Though the authors borrowed their theme from Cilappatikāram, they showed their own talents profoundly and compose these works to suit the legendary relevancies of Sri Lanka. The lucid portrayal of Sri Lankan culture, life style, economic pattern and religious life gives the status of national epic to this work. Besides, finding unity in diversity through the worship of Kaṇṇaki also plays a major role in breaking regional, racial and lingual barriers. On the whole, Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai is a great asset to the Sri Lankans as it strengthens the concept of nationalism.

Keywords: Kaṇṇakivazhakkurai, Kōvalanārkatai, Cilampukūral, Epic

Introduction

The epic Cilappatikāram had been adapted into three different versions, such as Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai, Kōvalanār Katai and Cilampu Kūral in Sri Lanka. These are popular in Batticaloa, Jaffna and Mullaitivu respectively. Though these three versions may be considered as three different works, there are similarities in their narration, division of chapters and diction; so that it is difficult to distinguish them from one another. The similarities among these three works led the scholars to opine that there ought to be a common source as a pioneer to these versions (Velupillai, A, 1989:87). This pioneer work may have been adapted by the copyist to suit their respective claims and needs, along with their necessity and creative ability. P.Poologasingam (1983:72) comments on this as follows.

‘The story of anklet sung by someone based on the epic of Cilappatikāram by Ilaṅkō, has developed with mutations as per the regional, chronological and the artistic nimbleness and the whims and fancies of the composers.’

By perusing these versions they are amply rich in folk literary aspects in their narration, diction, and composition. The story of these three works ought to have been very familiar with the common folks in the form of folklore, before it was compiled as an original literary work. A.Vellupillai opines thus: ‘a narration popular among the common folks may have attracted the

attention of the Kings of Jaffna who were keen in collecting, preserving and maintaining Tamil literary works’. Hence, there may be possibilities that this original work of these versions may have been composed or compiled by a King of Jaffna or anyone under his patronage. A.Vellupillai (1989:90) further adds:

‘The original version must have been recorded during the period of Jaffna kings. The Jaffna kings who encouraged Tamil literary efforts in so many directions must have taken steps to have a compilation made of the ‘Anklet Story’ prevalent among the common people”

Period of composition

Though this original work is believed to have been composed during the regime of Kings of Jaffna it is difficult to determine its exact date. F.X.C Nadarajah (1970:89) believes that this work belonged to the 14th century A.D. V.C.Kandiah (1968: XLII) opines that it belongs to a period earlier than 15th century A.D. Considering the internal evidences in the wordings such as ‘Parākkirama Pāṇṭiyan Āṇai’ (K.V, C.K: 123) and ‘Cētu paripālanan ennum Ciṅkaiyāriyan’(K.V, V.K:42), P.Poologasingam (1983:75) arrived at a conclusion that these kings referred to in the above line belonged to the period of latter part of the 14th century A.D or the early part of the 15th century A.D, and that the author of the original work ought to have lived in close proximity to this period. To assert this claim a palm frond manuscript bearing the year 1343 was found by Arasaratnam in Cettikkulam. According to A.Velupillai (1989:90) the year referred to in the manuscript, when considered as Saga era, it belongs to the 15th century A.D, and this year were to be the Christian era, then it should belong to the 14th century A.D.

Author of this work

M.S.Chelliah (1962:II), editor of Kōvalanār Katai, while quoting the tradition that Verṇivēl Caṭṭampiyār (teacher) was the author of this work during the Portuguese era (17th century A.D), says further that according to the internal evidences from the very work such as Kāṇkēyan, Tēvayar Kōn, Cakavīran and Nayinār Paṇṭikkan, as the names and attributes of the author. V.C Kandiah (1968: XLIX- LVI), referring to Cakavīran, Tēvayar Kōn and Āriyar Kōn as the name of the author of this work, but also tries to assert Kāṇkēyan is the actual

name of the author. F.X.C Nadarajah (1970:59) made a comparative study of these three works and arrived at a conclusion that Cekarācācēkaran V, alias Cayavīra Ciṅkaiyāriyan, is the author of this work and that he may have had all the above appellations.

Thus, it is difficult to establish the actual name of the author through available internal sources. But one could strongly assert that this original work belonged to the period of Āryacakravartti and one of the Kings of Jaffna or a poet patronized by him, is the author of this work. The blunder made by someone who copied the original manuscripts has caused this confusion about the name of the author. S.Sivalingarajah (2001:48) has made the following comment:

‘Under the circumstances of the mutilations of the written form, those who had this work in their memory may have rewritten and kept in palm manuscript form. The persons who rewritten this may have interpolated his name as the writer. Such matters too may have caused the confusion about the name of the author’.

The epic, composed during the period of the Kings of Jaffna, may have lost its fervour due to the social and cultural evolutions in the peninsula, but retained its importance and splendour in the Vanni and Batticaloa regions with textual variations.

National Epic

The epic which has the sense of nationalism in its each and every aspect may have called as national epic. Here the word ‘nationalism’ is not used in the political sense. It means the feelings of love and pride towards one’s own country or a feeling that one’s own country is better than any others. Hence the expression of the feelings of love, affection, pride, reverence and respect towards own country brings nationalistic features in an epic.

The epic Cilappatikāram has the state of national epic in Tamil Nadu. The following reasons are put forwarded to assert the above claim.

- i. Cilappatikāram links all the regions of Tamil Nadu despite their political, geographical, economical and cultural differences. Then the Tamil Nadu was divided into three major political Kingdoms such as Cōla Nādu, Pāṇṭiya Nādu and Cēra Nādu. Each Kingdom was under the rule of a separate King and had distinct culture, economic and social structure of its own. But Cilappatikāram extends its plot to all the three Kingdoms. Kaṇṇaki, the protagonist of this epic born and bred in Cola Nadu, then she resolved to move to Pāṇṭiya Nādu along with her husband Kōvaln in order to earn a living and she became a deity in Cēra Nādu. By perusing the texture of Cilappatikāram it becomes clear that the author,

Ilankōvaṭikal tries to find unity in diversity through his epic.

- ii. The story related in Cilappatikāram belongs to Tamil Nadu; it is not borrowed or adapted from Sanskrit works or any other sources. Though scholars have different opinions about the source of Cilappatikāram, they unanimously confess that the source is certainly originated with in Tamil Nadu.
- iii. The author of Cilappatikāram records the art, religious beliefs, customs, habits, social structures of Tamils as far as possible in his work. Hence this epic seems to be a vital record of Tamil culture. The prudent cultural and social descriptions of all major regions of Tamil Nadu are believed to be a great treasure to understand the Tamil culture and its advance state of civilization.

The epic Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and its other versions secure the dignity to mention as national epic in Sri Lanka. The followings assert the above claim.

- i. Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai tries to associate story of Kaṇṇaki with Sri Lanka.
- ii. It unifies the whole island through the worship of Kaṇṇaki.
- iii. It excels the beauty, glory and prosperity of the island.
- iv. It records the art, customs, beliefs, habits, economic patterns, religious activities and social structure of Sri Lankans.

Associate the story of Kaṇṇaki with Sri Lanka

Though Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and its other versions are the adaptation of the story of Cilappatikāram, these works try to preserve their originality in many occasions and to associate the story with Sri Lanka. Certain pieces of stories and descriptions are newly interpolated by the author of Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai which are not found in Cilappatikāram. The followings are could be pointed out in this connection.

- i. The stories about the birth of Kaṇṇaki
- ii. The detail description of Kaṇṇaki’s marriage
- iii. The expedition of Mikāman in search of Nāga – gem
- iv. The legend of Veṭiyaracan
- v. Pacify the wrath of Kaṇṇaki by performing sacred ablution.

Each version is coined up itself with different stories set around the birth of Kaṇṇaki as per the background of religious beliefs and folk traditions of particular regions in which they are composed. These stories are set so as to deify Kaṇṇaki as an incarnation of a goddess or the embodiment of the same. Cilappatikāram only relates the story of Kaṇṇaki with the

intention of lauding her chastity, but Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and other versions give more prominence to the deification of Kaṇṇaki throughout. This characteristic appears in Kōvalanār Katai profusely with sporadic hymns, adoring Kaṇṇaki as a goddess.

The Story of Kaṇṇaki is briefly related in Cilappatikāram. It begins from the marriage of Kaṇṇaki and Kōvalan and moves towards the climax of court scene in Madurai (Vazhakkāṭu Kātai). But Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and its other versions elaborate this story from the birth of Kaṇṇaki. Five cantos namely Varamperu Kātai, Kappal Vaitta Kātai, Kaṭalōṭṭu Kātai, Poṇṇukku Marippu Kātai and Valinaṭai Kātai are newly included in these versions. Besides, certain changes and additions are also made by the authors with the story of Cilappatikāram. Certain pieces of Cilappatikāram such as Antimālai Cirappu Ceita Kātai, Inthira Vizhā Ūrr Eṭutta Kātai, Kaṭalāṭu Kātai, Kānal Vari, Vēnil Kātai, Nāṭu Kān Kātai of Pukār canto and Kaṭu Kān Kātai, Ūr kān Kātai, Āycciyar Kuravai, Tunpamālai, Ūr Cūl Vari, Vañchina Mālai, Azhrpaṭu Kātai, Kaṭṭurai, Kātai of Madurai Canto are left in these works. The Vañchi Canto of Cilappatikāram is totally left over in these versions. Instead they add Kulircci Kātai along with the main story. Unlike Cilappatikāram, these versions give more importance to the supernatural act of resuscitation of dead Kōvalan with her wonderful power of chastity. The legend that Kaṇṇaki appears among the young shepherds at Varṇāpalai and ask to worship her, in Cilampukūral is also included to associate the worship of Kaṇṇaki with Sri Lanka.

In the same way the legends of Veṭiyaracan and Mikāman are intentionally interpolated with these versions to associate the story of Kaṇṇaki with Sri Lanka. Mikāman, a sailor who was employed by the father of Kaṇṇaki, Mānākar to bring the gem of Nāga from Nāgamaṇi Nādu, now Nainātivu, one of the isles of Ceylon precincts of the Jaffna peninsula. These versions assume Mikāman visited to Sri Lanka twice. His first visit had the intention of purchasing planks and timber from the King who ruled the Sothern region of Sri Lanka, to build up a ship. Under the canto of 'Eelam Cutti Ōṭutal' these versions highly extol the prosperity and the importance of Eastern, Southern and Western coast of Sri Lanka. Mikāman began his voyage from a South Indian port and directly sailed to Mullaitivu. From Mullaitivu he travels along the Eastern and Western coastal areas and came to Puttalam where he met the king and received his assistance. He did not dare to enter into the Northern coast of Sri Lanka because that time it was under the regin of Veṭiyaracan who had a strong navy regiment of his own. The legends of Veṭiyaracan and his brothers Vīranārāyanan and Vilankutevan are purposefully interpolated in these versions to associate the story of Kaṇṇaki with Sri Lanka. During his second visit to Sri

Lanka Mikāman conquered the king Veṭiyaracan and brought him to Tamil Nadu as a captive; later he was released by the merchant Mānākar.

Lengthy description of Kaṇṇaki's marriage is a distinguished feature in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and the other versions. Verses praising the divine qualities, beauty and grace of Kaṇṇaki are included in this lengthy description. Prevention of sexual relations between Kaṇṇaki and Kōvalan by a great fire in their first night and some sort of stories like that are not find in Cilappatikāram. Pacifying the wrath of Kaṇṇaki (Kulirci Kātai) is specially attached in these versions. Annually the songs of Kulirci Kātai are piously recited in the temples of Kaṇṇaki during the Pongal celebrations to this day. The story of Kaṇṇaki ends with Kulircci Kātai in these versions. Authors leave the story related in Vañci Kāntam of Cilappatikāram.

Unity in diversity

The Epic Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai tried to establish unity in diversity through the worship of Kaṇṇaki. The worship of Kaṇṇaki had its prominence not only among the Tamils but also among the Sinhalese as well. The Sinhala literary works, Pattini Halla, Pālaṅka Halla, Pattini Kantāva, Pattini Vilāpaya, Gajabāhu Kantāva, Vayanti Mālā, Amba Pattini Upata, Ampavitumina, Mal Pattini Upata, Mātēvi Katāva, Pattini Yātinna, Pattini Piḷima, Pattini Kōḷmura, Pāḷaṅka Maruvime Cintuva, Panṭi Netta Meku Upatta, Aṅkeli Upatta, Cilampa Kattava show that Kaṇṇaki worship has influenced among the Sinhalese as Patni worship (Pavalakanthan, M, 2003:28-35). The Sinhalese worship Kannaki to protect them from the epidemics to this day.

But this Pattini deity is being adored as Kaṇṇaki for long by the Tamils in Sri Lanka, especially in North and East. In this background there were many temples for Kaṇṇaki established in the Northern and the Eastern regions. Even today some of these temples have their prominence, patronage, traditional services, folk rituals and ceremonies in these regions¹⁵.

The literary works except Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and its different versions do not mention about the worship of Kaṇṇaki. Perhaps, the fact, that this worship is very much related with the folk traditions, may have caused the avoidance by the other classical literatures. Many folk songs and Pattatis (பத்ததிகள்;) connected with the Kaṇṇaki worship, are preserved in the temples of Batticaloa and Vanni regions, where the annual Poṅkal (nṅhq;fy;) celebration and other rituals are performed on the basis of Pattatis. Reciting the epics, Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai (Batticaloa) and Cilampukūral (Vanni) piously and singing the folk songs are the common features of the annual festivals of Kaṇṇaki in these

regions. By perusing the above facts, it is possible to surmise how far Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and other versions broke down the barriers of race, region cast and language prevailed among Sri Lankans and the unify the people of Ceylon through the worship of Kaṇṇaki.

Description of Sri Lanka

Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and other versions also have the sense of elevating the pride and the beauty of Sri Lanka in many verses. No other Tamil literary works composed during the period of Kings of Jaffna have such description about Sri Lanka. Particularly, the canto 'Eelam Cutti Odutal' is intentionally interpolated with these versions. At first time the term 'Eelam' was used in these works. 'Eelam' is the ancient name of Ceylon; which is also affirmed by a line from Paṭṭinapālai, one of the literary works of Sangam age. The act of sailing along the coast of Sri Lanka is described in this canto. Many valuable references such as the name and the location of coastal areas and the culture, religion and the custom of people who lived in those regions are portrayed briefly. Trincomalee, Kevuliyāmunai, Īccurampattai, panritīvu, Callitīvu, Pācikkūṭa, Ērāvūr, Puliyanturai, Batticaloa, Kaṇṭapanam(Tirukkōvil) Uppalam, Dēnuvara, Galle, Kolumputurai, Alukkāmatturai, Makkūnai, Kaḷutturai, Uluttapallam, Colombo, Vattalai, Negombo, Māruvitam, Chillow, Kutiraimalai, Kāraitīvu are some of the important coastal regions mentioned in these works. Besides the references about the Northern coastal regions such as Kīrimalai, Tolpuram, Nākatīpa and Delft are also given there. By perusing these details, it is possible to learn that the author of Kannaki Vazhakkurai is well acquainted with the coastal regions of Sri Lanka. Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai also mentions of the generosity of the Southern King, and the great valour of Veṭiyaracan.

Portrayal of the Culture of Sri Lanka

Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and other versions give many sporadic references about the culture, art, religion, custom, belief, habits and social structures of Sri Lankans. Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai is the only epic that records the culture of the Tamils precisely long after Cilappatikāram. The subject matter which is taken under this subtitle is vast and the entire topic may not be dealt with in a single discourse. As such, only the matters about the art and craft recorded in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai are taken here for discussion.

The adeptness of the Sri Lankans in classical music and the scholarly attainment they had in it, is elaborately described in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai. The description of the musical aspects, given in detail by the author of the above literature, shows that he took a keen interest in documenting such matters for posterity. Mātavi Araṇkēṇṇu Kātai' in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai

(M.A.K:49-53) deals with different Rāgās (musical modes) of Karnātic Music acquired by Mātavi. The art of dance as well as that of classical music has been intertwined with each other. As a result, whenever the descriptions of dance are referred to in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai, the author records the details of classical music there. It is very important to observe the phrase 'Paṇṇamainta Kūttu' (The dance accompanied with music), mentioned in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai (M.A.K:49), since it expresses the importance of classical music in dance.

The different kinds of instruments played in temples are portrayed in 'Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai' (A.P.K:53). In 'Kōvalanār Kātai' (M.M:116), names of instruments played at a wedding are described. These instruments were used specially to entertain the assemblage at the wedding. It is clear from these evidences that musical programmes were being conducted as a performing art in the weddings of the wealthy and influential in the society. Names of numerous instruments used in the stages are given in 'Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai'(M.A.K:47-55). Further, while giving the description, how Mātavi learnt Music, the virtuosity of the preceptor, modesty and interest of the trainer, auspicious time to initiate the lessons, the scheme or syllabi of the course of music are given elaborately by the author of Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai (M.A.K:47-55). In short, Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai seemed to be a treasure trove, as the epic of 'Cilappatikāram' for those who like to study the tradition of classical music and the educational heritage of the same.

Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai has recorded ample information in the canto of, 'Mātavi Araṇkēṇṇu Kātai' about the dances in the stages. The virtuosity of a dance teacher, the modesty of the disciple, the procedure of the training, the curricula and the suitable place and time to get the practice are given in detail there (M.A.K:59-87). Similarly, the stage performance of Mātavi is also elaborated in this work (M.A.K: 223-289). Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai is the only literary work that gives a detailed stage performance of dance since Cilappatikāram. It could be seen that there are verses in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai that agree with the musical rhythms (தாளக்கட்டு) of ballad norms. Quoting these verses S.Sivalingarajah (2001:52) claims that there are several useful evidences available in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai for those who wish to study the Sri Lankan folk dramatic tradition. This is further highlighted by Pulavar A.Periyathambipillai (1968:XVII-XVIII) in his forward to Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai;

The musical notes mentioned in Māthavi Araṇkēṇṇu Kātai have a tinge of ballad style of Batticaloa. The verses expounding the pomposity of the dramatic characters (தன்மேம்பாட்டுரை) generally seen in Batticaloa folk dramas are often appear in Mātavi's speeches too. The musical

rhythms especially that belonged to the folk dramatic tradition also could be seen in Mātavi Araṅkēṇṇu Kātai profusely.

Detailed description of the stage for dances is given in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai with astrological directions from Caracōtimālai. The techniques and procedures of selecting a particular place to construct a stage and theatre, setting up the pillars, planking them and other constructing techniques are elaborately described in the above literary work (M.A.K:111-115). Apart from these, the author further relates that the stage was decorated with different kinds of silk, precious stones, festoons, young coconuts and various paintings (M.A.K:145-151). Not only the stage but the entire place around the stage was also decorated with festoons in fish shape (மகரதோரணம்), Niraikuṭam (நிறைகுடம்), etc.

Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and Kōvalanār Katai furnish much information about the jewel craft and the skilled artisans of this period. The marriage canto of Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai describes one of the important rituals of 'Ponnurukkal', melting gold to make 'Tāli' by an artisan of that trade. It also describes the exquisite workmanship in jewel craft of melting gold and the respective tools they handle and the rituals to be followed during such occasions. Nothing is mentioned about the working of jewellery from molten gold there. The detail of the dust to make the gold glitter, known as 'Minnuppoṭi' (மின்னுப்பொடி) is also given in this literary work (K.K: 16-19). While Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai gives these facts briefly, Kōvalanār Katai elaborates in its section 'Maṇamālai. The author describes lucidly and elaborately the process of turning out jewellery including anklet of Kaṇṇaki before her wedding. Kōvalanār Katai gives information along with Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai about the tools used in jewellery making and the prayers during the melting of gold etc. The turning out of anklet using the molten gold is described acutely which is a novelty in Kōvalanār Katai. This description reflects the art of jewellery making clearly. Further the opening of the aperture of the anklet with ritualistic splendour and with the prayer of goldsmiths too is elaborated clearly in Kōvalanār Katai (M.M:107).

The art of ship building too was very popular among Sri Lankan Tamils. Detailed information related to this art is given in Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai. According to this literary work and Kōvalanār Katai it is known that there were master ship builders for generation in the North and East of the island nation, particularly in the littorals. These literary works further affirm that quality timber was obtained from the Southern part of the island nation (K.V.K:108). Most of the verses in the canto of Kappal Vaitta Kātai of Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai, speak profusely about the techniques and the art of ship building (K.V.K:200-266). They not only give information

pertaining to astrological matters but furnish the techniques during ship building and the minute details of observances also. Fitting and setting the masts of ships, warming the planks to bend them, embellishing the ship too are given in detail. These seem to have been composed by well experienced master ship builders with skillfulness in this art or someone who was well versed in the science of ship building.

Conclusion

By perusing the above facts it is clear that Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai and the other versions, Kōvalanār Katai and Cilampu Kūral have enough qualities to highlight them as national epics. Though the authors get their theme from Cilappatikaram, they showed their own talents and views amply and compose these works to suit the legendry relevancies of Sri Lanka. The portrayal of Sri Lankan culture, life style, economic pattern and religious life indicates the intention of the authors clearly. Further, finding unity in diversity through the worship of Kaṇṇaki is also worth mentioning. In short, Kaṇṇaki Vazhakkurai which is a great asset to the Sri Lankans, provides and develops sense of nationalism in Sri Lanka.

Abbreviations:

1. C.K: Cilampu Kūral
2. V.K: Vazhakkurai Kātai
3. M.M: Manamālai
4. M.A.K: Mātavi Araṅkēṇṇu Kātai
5. A.P.K: Amman Piranta Kātai
6. K.V.K: Kappal Vaitta Kātai

Transliteration guide:

அ: a	ஆ: ā	இ: i	ஈ: ī
உ: u	ஊ: ū	எ: e	ஏ: ē
ஐ: ai	ஓ: o	ஔ: ō	ஔ: au
க: k	ங: ṅ	ச: c	ஞ: ṇ
ட: ṭ	ண: ṇ	த: t	ந: n
ப: p	ம: m	ய: y	ர்: r
ல்: l	வ: v	ழ: zh	ள்: l
ற்: r	ன்: n		

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